
**SHORT
GUIDE**

**AFTER A
SEXUAL
ASSAULT**

AT THE
HEALTH
SERVICES
**WE FACE UP TO
VIOLENCE.**

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

INFORMATION FOR FEMALE VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Violence against women and girls is the most common infringement of human rights. It happens in all societies, countries and cultures, regardless of age, civil status or social class. Although it has many different manifestations and can occur anywhere, it stems from the same source: the discrimination women suffer simply because they are women.

One of the most frequent forms of gender-based violence is the sexual violence perpetrated by men throughout history. Sexual violence has been used both in wartime and peacetime to dominate, humiliate and control women by violating their bodies, minds and sexuality. Despite common beliefs, sexual violence is often carried out by a relative or acquaintance.

The most serious form of sexual violence is **rape**. The most frequent **physical health consequences** are unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, sexually transmitted disease and HIV infection. Other consequences include haemorrhaging, recurrent vaginal and

urinary infection, sexual dysfunction, painful sexual relations and loss of sexual desire. Because of this, you'll be given medication and antibiotics at the hospital emergency service to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. Make sure you go to the health checks and follow-ups prescribed.

If necessary, you'll also be prescribed antiviral medications to prevent transmission of the HIV virus (AIDS). It's very important to follow all instructions until your appointment at the Internal Medicine Service or Infectious Diseases Unit, where they'll prescribe treatment and follow-up. Some of these medications may be incompatible with others you're already taking, so you'll need to tell the doctor about your current medications. You'll also receive information about preventing communicable diseases and the possible side effects of the medication. The most frequent side effects are tiredness, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, flatulence, headaches, insomnia, dizziness and muscle pain. Less frequently, they may cause an allergic reaction, skin rash, anaemia, or a kidney or liver disorder, although in most cases these conditions

are not serious and are usually cured after treatment. See your doctor if you experience any of these.

Depending on how you feel, you can resume sexual relations any time, but make sure you use a condom until the serological tests have been completed.

The **psychological consequences** include fear, humiliation, shame, guilt, insomnia, restlessness and mistrust. If you have a partner, your relationship may be affected. Your relationships in other circles may also suffer, e.g. with relatives, friends, acquaintances and the people around you. **You're not alone: ask for help and advice.** Don't hesitate to go to your health centre for a check-up and advice. You can also go straight to the **specialist healthcare services** for female victims of gender-based violence. **You'll find them at www.dalaalarma.com**

Sexual assault is a serious offence against the freedom, dignity, and physical and psychological integrity of a human being. It is often not reported, for reasons such as a traditional widespread tolerance in society of this type of behaviour, the fear

of reprisals from the attacker or of being blamed for what happened, worrying about what people will think, insufficient family or social support, the confusion or shock after an assault, and a lack of information. **IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT.**

Don't forget that you have the right to report a sexual assault. It's your choice, and you may also be helping other victims. If you want to report a sexual assault, **go to a police station, civil guard post or courthouse** after you've received medical attention. Make sure you take the copy of the medical report you received at the emergency service. If you want, you can also apply for a protection order.

If you think you're **in danger at any time, call the emergency service on 112.** Ask to be put through to the Service for Female Victims of Violence and ask for help.

MOST COMMON REACTIONS

Even if you don't have any serious physical health consequences, sexual assault is an extremely traumatic experience. For a few weeks after a sexual assault you may have unpleasant feelings that are a normal response when adapting to an abnormal traumatic experience.

You may feel afraid or even terrified, confused, angry, ashamed or humiliated, and have symptoms such as shaking, accelerated heart rate or shortness of breath. You may have trouble sleeping, lose interest in your usual daily activities, or even find it difficult to be around relatives or people you're normally close to.

You're experiencing acute stress and your mind and body are reacting to it.



Don't be alarmed: in a few weeks, these feelings should become less frequent as you start to feel better. However, recovery can be slow at times. The symptoms may interfere with your daily activities and you may no longer feel like the person you were before. If that happens, you've done as much as you can to recover, but now it's time to seek professional help. Starting psychological and/or psychopharmacological treatment will help to relieve the symptoms and aid recovery.

Here are some of the most common thoughts and feelings after a sexual assault:

«...I keep thinking about what happened... I can't get it out of my mind... I can't help reliving it over and over again... I see his face all the time... I can feel him grabbing my wrists..., I can smell him... I can hear what he said to me... I have nightmares...»

Flashbacks occur involuntarily and can cause intense fear, helplessness, anger, sadness and guilt. They can be very real, making you feel like you've gone back in time and are reliving the assault, leaving you confused and disoriented.

These thoughts, memories, images or nightmares are an attempt to comprehend, “take in” and cope with what happened.

«...I'm scared all the time... What if I'm pregnant...? What if I've caught a disease...? I'm afraid of dying, of being home alone, of the rapist coming back...»

«...I get panic attacks. I can't breathe! I can't keep still... I'm incapable of sitting still in class...»

These feelings are common in dangerous or threatening situations. You may also feel afraid or anxious when places or objects remind you of the assault. Triggers include similar people or places, certain smells, tastes or colours, a similar context, or even the same time of day as the attack.

You need to understand that fear and anxiety are a defensive reaction to a threat. They help you to protect yourself and be cautious.

«...It can't be true... Did it really happen...? Am I imagining it? Was it a dream...? Why me...? I don't recognise myself when I look in the mirror... Why am I so calm...? Why can't I cry...?»

In the first few days you may wonder if the assault really happened. You may have difficulty accepting what happened, reject any help offered to you, become withdrawn, and tell no one about it. Sometimes, in an attempt to return to normal life, victims resume their usual activities as if “nothing happened”, “I’m fine, it’s all over now”, without talking about it and refusing help from professionals and the people around them.

You need to understand that your mind is trying to switch off from what happened, step away from it and take a break so you can recover.

«...I've shut myself up at home since it happened. I don't go out with anyone... I can't talk to men... I can't go past the place where it happened... I can't stand enclosed spaces... I try not to go out at night...»

Avoiding situations like the one that terrified you or made you panic is a way of coping with fear and the feeling of being in danger. It's normal to avoid everything that directly or indirectly reminds you of what you went through, such as the place where it happened, people who resemble the attacker, or going out around the same time.

Victims avoid thinking or talking about what happened, to keep the pain at bay. This need to shut out emotions and feelings, whether negative or positive, makes us feel distant, remote and isolated from the people we're closest to - the people we need support and kindness from.

Over time, this type of avoidance will stop.

«...When I walk down the street I feel unsafe, unprotected... I can't stand anyone walking behind me... »

«I jump when the phone rings and my heart starts pounding... I'm easily startled... I get scared by the slightest noise or when someone's walking behind me or touches me on the back... I wake up anxious at night, but I can't remember what I was dreaming about...»

After a sexual assault you're constantly alert, as if you're in danger all the time. It's not unusual to be easily startled, impatient or irritable, have difficulty concentrating and sleeping, or feel unsafe, on edge and constantly afraid, even in safe places. Physical symptoms such as tight muscles, shaking, sweating, increased heart rate and shortness of breath are common.

You need to understand that all these reactions prepare you to respond to danger at any time, but they can wear you out if they go on for too long.

«Nothing makes me happy... I'm really sad and I don't know why... I don't have fun any more... I feel so helpless... I should just go away... Maybe I'd be better off dead... Nothing will ever be the same again...»

After the first few days, as you become aware of the harm you suffered, you may feel sad and cry often. You may be less interested in people and activities and find that your plans for the future have vanished. The world around you may look different, greyer and less friendly; you don't trust people any more. You've lost all feeling of safety and confidence. Since the assault you feel more vulnerable and helpless.

You may suddenly switch from feeling sad to feeling angry, not only at your attacker, but also at the people around you. If it's unusual for you to feel angry or furious, you may be alarmed by this hostile, irritable and even aggressive behaviour towards other people, especially those you're closest to.

It's possible to get over these types of experiences. Talk about what happened with family and friends, and people you trust. Don't keep it to yourself.

«...I feel like it was my fault... I deserved it... Maybe it happened because of something I did... No one will believe me...»

«What will people think?... I can't tell my friends or family...»

If you think you did something wrong to make such a terrible thing happen to you, you're blaming yourself. Many innocent people involved in a traumatic situation blame themselves for what they did, or didn't do, to survive. Some women feel guilty because they didn't defend themselves; others feel guilty because they did.

Feeling guilty is taking the blame for what the attacker did.

Other people might victimise you further by blaming or reprimanding you:

*“You shouldn’t have been there...”
“You should’ve defended yourself...” “It happened because of the way you are..., because you’d been drinking..., because of the way you dress...”*

You may feel ashamed and prefer to keep it to yourself.

It doesn’t matter how or why the assault happened. It doesn’t matter if you’d been drinking or taking drugs, where you were, or what your relationship with the attacker was. IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT. No one has the right to assault you. It’s a criminal offence. It can happen to you and it can happen to any woman.

IT’S NEVER YOUR FAULT.

“...I’m a bad person... I don’t like the way I am... I don’t like my body...”

There may be a before and after in the image you have of yourself. You might feel different, like someone else with less self-confidence. Your body’s no longer the same: it’s become the instrument responsible for the assault. You may not want to see yourself in the mirror, dress up or take care of yourself like you did before.

«...I don’t feel like going to work... I can’t get out of bed to go to class... I don’t feel like going out or being with people...»

For the first few days, you may have difficulty coping with your usual routine. Your mind and body need to recover. Go easy on them. See a doctor, explain what happened and follow his or her indications. Give yourself a few days off and start your usual activities again bit by bit. In the first few days or weeks you might have to step back from your commitments and make sure you feel safe in your surroundings.

Take your time and seek support to embark on the path to recovery.



**WHAT CAN YOU
DO TO RECOVER?**

Ensure your surroundings are safe and pleasant.

Find a safe place where you feel at ease and are in good company. If you want to, stay with a friend or relative for a while, especially if you live alone or your attacker knows where you live. Whenever possible, make sure you're surrounded by people who respect your privacy. Try not to isolate yourself. Keep busy and avoid downtime that could trigger unpleasant feelings and thoughts of guilt.

Make a self-care plan for the next few weeks.

- Make sure you rest, and try to keep a balance between sleeping and waking. Don't change your sleeping habits, because you could end up sleeping during the day and wandering aimlessly at night.
- Eat healthily and have regular, balanced meals, even if you eat lightly.
- Limit the amount of time you watch TV. Try not to read about violence or watch violent programmes.

- Do exercise to relieve tight muscles, cheer yourself up and sleep better.
- Avoid alcohol and stimulating beverages like coffee, tea and soft drinks with caffeine. They'll increase your anxiety and make it difficult to sleep..
- Don't resort to substance abuse to relieve discomfort. It can cause health problems and affect your recovery.
- Don't take any medicines without checking with your doctor first.

Look for support...

... and, if you need to, talk to someone about what happened. Help, kindness, and the company of those close to you are some of the most effective resources for recovering from difficult situations. But if talking wears you out and you'd rather keep busy and resume your daily routine, go ahead: it's a natural protective reaction.

Find out...

... about the psychological reactions of victims after an assault. It'll help you to understand your reactions, identify what you're capable of and the skills you have to achieve it, and comprehend the enormous effort your mind and body are making to recover and move on.

Little by little, face...

...the situations that remind you of the assault. Don't avoid them, because any relief you feel won't last long and you'll find it increasingly difficult to cope. If you're afraid to go out or face situations that remind you of the assault, find ways to feel safer and ask someone to go with you when you go out.

Ask for support and treatment ...

... if you continue to have strong emotional reactions and find it difficult to resume your everyday activities. Psychological and psychiatric help are essential to prevent disorders such as post-traumatic stress, depression or substance abuse.

If you decide to go on treatment, don't give up or get discouraged.

Both psychological and pharmacological treatment take time. Recovery is a gradual process. You'll slowly start to feel better and take back control of your life.

References:

- *Guía de autoayuda para mujeres víctimas de una agresión sexual reciente*. Hospital Universitari Clinic. Barcelona (2009).
- *Protocolo de atención a mujeres víctimas de agresión sexual*. Complejo Hospitalario Universitario Insular-Materno Infantil de Gran Canaria. Servicio Canario de la Salud (2017).



Pacto de Estado
contra la violencia de género



Servicio
Canario de la Salud



**Gobierno
de Canarias**